



# The Essentials Of Theosophy

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# The Essentials of Theosophy

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*Om mani padme hum*—the ancient Buddhist mantra expresses profound truths in a poetic way. The mantra can be translated (in so far as it is possible to translate it at all) as “Oh, the jewel in the lotus, ah!” The first and last words, *om* and *hum*, are really untranslatable; they are mysterious syllables that suggest, but do not directly state, meanings of the usual kind.

The two middle words, *mani padme*, meaning “the jewel in the lotus”, are thus a poem enclosed in a mystery. And a remarkable poem it is—a wonderfully strange image: within the tender and transitory petals of the lotus flower lies the adamant and enduring gem—the eternal diamond-seed from which the brief blossom springs.

There are many meanings in the image of the jewel and the lotus. But perhaps the chief meaning is that, however superficially different they seem, the jewel and the lotus are essentially one. When we say that a quality is essential, we mean that it is indispensable because it touches the essence or the true self of a thing. The essentials of a thing are what it really is. Beneath the surface-appearance of the lotus lies its essence—the jewel. To look for essentials is to seek the jewel in the lotus, and that is no small or easy task.

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To look for the essentials of Theosophy is to ask what the Divine Wisdom really is. How can that question be answered? How can we fathom the depths of the wisdom or pluck the jewel from the lotus? Once there was a physicist who, when invited to give a speech to other scientists, announced the subject of his talk as “The Universe and Other Matters”. Anyone who tries to describe the essentials of Theosophy may seem to be as conceited and foolish as that physicist. On the other hand, there is an old saying that Theosophy has shallows in which a child may safely wade, as well as depths in which a giant must swim. However different they are in some respects, the shallows and the depths share the same water. If we paddle in the shallows we can know something of what the depths are like. In enquiring about the essentials of Theosophy, we shall certainly not exhaust the depths of the Wisdom but we may wet our toes and test the water.

There are two aspects of Theosophy whose essentials need to be considered: the theoretical aspect and the practical. The word theory comes from the Greek *theoria*, “a view or way of looking at things.” A theory is a window on the world. Sometimes, indeed, the word is used to refer to something unreal or impractical, as when we say, “Oh, that’s just theory.” But to reject theories is to reject windows and therefore to remain in a closed and viewless room. As “The Golden Stairs” tells us, we need open minds; and for the mind to be open, it must

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have windows—that is, theories—and it needs more windows than one.

The fact that theories are windows means that two different theories can both be correct. If two windows afford views of different parts of the landscape or show the same scene from different angles, we do not say that one view is right and the other wrong. We recognise that they are just different ways of looking at the same reality. To be sure, one or another window maybe more useful for a particular purpose, depending on what we want to see; but the views they afford are equally true. So, too, theories about the nature and purpose of life may differ, but they can be complementary rather than contradictory. In classical Hindu philosophy, there are six schools: the Vaiseshika, the Nyaya, the Sankhya, the Yoga, the Mimamsa, and the Vedanta. The Sanskrit term for a school of philosophy is *darsana*, from the root *drs* meaning “to see”; it is thus equivalent to the Greek theory, a way of seeing things.

Theosophy includes a theory or *darsana*—a window through which we can look upon the world. No inerrancy or infallibility is claimed for Theosophical theory. It is not a revealed truth that must be accepted on faith. Rather it is a discovery made by generations of sages, *rishis*, and masters—a discovery that we are invited to share, to confirm for ourselves, to supplement and to pass on, not

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unthinkingly but critically. Theosophical theory is one of John Keats's

*Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.*

Seas whose depths are perilous are also sources of life-giving water, and forlorn lands call for exploration and settlement. Theosophical theory is, indeed, a window onto a marvellous and inviting landscape.

In addition to being theoretical, however, Theosophy is also practical. The word *practice* comes from the Greek *praktike*, “a concern with action,” from the verb *prassein*, “to pass through, experience, act.” Theory is looking; practice is doing. The two are complementary, each being indispensable to the other. If we wish to sail across the “perilous seas”, we need both a chart to guide us and a skilled crew to run the ship. Lacking either, the ship is lost. So theory without practice is a map that is not followed, whereas practice without theory is a journey with no direction.

Dr. Samuel Johnson observed that “a man may be very sincere in good principles, without having good practice”. But in that case, good principles (or theory) are worth nothing. So, too, Leonardo da Vinci wrote: “The supreme misfortune is when theory outstrips performance.” But the reverse is just as bad—the proverbial bull in a china shop has great performance potential but with no theory to guide it, and so the result is broken porcelain. The

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philosopher-Emperor Marcus Aurelius recognised the need for a balanced life when in his *Meditations* he advised himself to “look to the essence of a thing, whether it be a point of doctrine [that is, of theory], of practice, or of interpretation.” That is what we also need to do—to look at the essence of Theosophical theory and practice and see whether we can interpret those things for ourselves. The Theosophical Society has no dogmas, no required beliefs; it has no creed to which its members are asked to subscribe. But Theosophy is a theory—a way of looking at the world—and implies a practice—a way of acting, of passing through the world. The essentials of that theory and practice can be summarised in three statements.

## **Reality and Brotherhood**

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In the Proem to *The Secret Doctrine*, H. P. Blavatsky tells us that “three fundamental propositions” form the basis of all Theosophical theory. The first of these is that there is an “Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable Principle”, which is the “one absolute Reality”, underlying all manifested, conditioned being. “This Infinite and Eternal Cause . . . is the rootless root of ‘all that was, is, or ever shall be.’ ” This one Reality is the source of all consciousness, matter, and life in the universe.

Orthodox science views matter as the basic reality. It further suggests that matter is organised by natural laws

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into increasingly complex states until eventually it is so highly organised that it results in life and the ability to grow and reproduce. By other natural laws, living matter is organised into even more complex states, finally producing consciousness by which it becomes aware of the world around it. Thus, from this point of view, life is a way matter acts when it reaches a certain stage of complexity, while consciousness is no more than an epiphenomenon of matter. The one essential of the universe, in the scientific view, is matter; life and consciousness are incidental by-products.

The theosophical view is quite different. It holds that essential reality is different from anything we know or can know. It is, says H.P.B., not “being” at all, but rather “be-ness”—the essence of reality, a principle. From it comes the duality of consciousness and matter, each implying the other. Consciousness exists only as it is reflected in matter, and matter exists only as it is imaged forth by consciousness. Without matter to be aware of, consciousness could not be; this statement is quite acceptable to orthodox science.

The complementary statement, however, is one of those windows opening on to an enchanted world: without consciousness to be aware of it, matter could not be. Not long ago, most scientists would have dismissed such a statement as sheer mysticism. But as scientists investigate deep into the subatomic world, matter, as we

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think of it, disappears altogether leaving in its wake particles of energy or, more accurately, probabilities of energy whose very existence is mysteriously wrapped up with our consciousness of them. Amit Goswami is one of those new physicists who adopt this apparently mystical view of matter, for example, in his stimulating book, *The Visionary Window: A Quantum Physicist's Guide to Enlightenment*. In this view, consciousness and matter seem indeed to be functions of one another, just as the Ancient Wisdom holds.

And what about life? Theosophy views it as the relationship or interaction between consciousness and matter. When consciousness bends to matter and matter responds by moulding itself to conscious forms, the result is life. No particle of the universe, however small or isolated, exists without matter, consciousness, and life—not fully developed, perhaps, but there in essence. So within all manifested being is the one absolute being; behind the manifold and varied universe is the one reality.

Every theory implies action. What, then, is the practical consequence of the first fundamental proposition? The theory is that there is one reality underlying all existence—all matter, consciousness, and life. What practice does that imply? The oneness of reality includes the oneness of humanity. And the oneness of humanity requires that we live so as to honour that oneness, to

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promote it, to be brotherly to our fellows. Thus the first fundamental proposition of *The Secret Doctrine* implies the first object of the Theosophical Society: “to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or colour.” It is no accident that the object of brotherhood was placed first on the theosophical agenda or that the Masters regarded it as the *raison d’être* of the Society. In 1880, the Master K. H. wrote to A. P. Sinnett, “The *Chiefs* want a ‘Brotherhood of Humanity,’ a real Universal Fraternity started” (*Mahatma Letters*, chronological no. 12). If we accept the first and fundamental proposition of theosophical theory—the oneness of reality—we are driven inescapably to the practice of brotherhood. To espouse brotherhood without knowing why is mere sentimentality. To proclaim our belief in the radical oneness of reality without living in brotherhood is hypocrisy. The theory and the practice must go together. Thus the first proposition and the first object together imply service as an aspect of theosophical life.

## **Order and Study**

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The second fundamental proposition—the second basis of theosophical theory—is that “the Secret Doctrine affirms . . . the Eternity of the Universe *in toto* as a boundless plane; periodically ‘the playground of

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numberless Universes incessantly manifesting and disappearing.’ ”

“This second assertion of the Secret Doctrine is the absolute universality of that law of periodicity, of flux and reflux, ebb and flow, which physical science has observed and recorded in all departments of nature. An alternation such as that of Day and Night, Life and Death, Sleeping and Waking, is a fact so common, so perfectly universal and without exception, that it is easy to comprehend that in it we see one of the absolutely fundamental laws of the universe”.

The second proposition affirms regular cycles or patterned repetition in all things—that is, law, order, or system. It asserts that the universe is not an accident but a planned and orderly place, that there is a design governing the world process. The universe is not just a flash in the pan. The Big Bang to which science attributes the beginning of our universe is not something that happened once only. Astronomers are now debating whether the universe will go on expanding endlessly until it finally dissipates into the far reaches of nowhere, or whether it will contract and return to some dense and compact unit at the centre of everywhere. Theosophical theory predicates an oscillating universe that alternately expands and contracts in a regular, orderly way.

Looking at ourselves, we see the law of periodicity in reincarnation—the alternation of life and death, as

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H.P.B. called it. And in karma—the law of cause and effect that controls and induces birth in the physical world—we see the principle of order that is essential to all periodicity. In us little human beings, as in the great universe itself, there is order and repetition, there is karma and cyclic renewal. Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, said that a language is a system in which everything hangs together. He might have said that just as truly of anything else in the universe, or of the very universe itself. The word universe comes from a Latin word meaning “turned toward one”. The universe is a whole combining all its seemingly disparate parts into a unity. That unity is not so much the stuff of which the universe is made as the patterns that shape material stuff. Norbert Wiener, the inventor of cybernetics, wrote, “We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves.” We, and everything we sense about us, are not the solid lumps of matter we suppose, but patterns perpetuating themselves.

The practical consequence of the second proposition is that we should try to discover the order of the universe so that we can live in harmony with it. We seek to find that order in a variety of ways, the chief of which are the disciplines of science, philosophy, and religion. The aim of science is to study order in physical nature. The aim of philosophy is to study order in intellectual matters. That of religion is to study order in spiritual affairs.

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And so the second fundamental proposition, which asserts the existence of order, naturally leads to the second object of the Theosophical Society: “to encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science”. Such study must be comparative because no single religion or single branch of philosophy or science has a monopoly on truth. Among them, however, these three disciplines cover the whole of the human being.

There are, according to one analysis of the human constitution, exactly three “bases” (or *upadhis*) for consciousness. The *sthulopadhi*, or gross base, is the normal waking consciousness functioning on the physical plane. The *sukshmopadhi*, or subtle base, is the consciousness on the astral and lower mental planes, that is, the personality underlying our physical consciousness. The *karanopadhi*, or causal base, is consciousness on the higher mental and buddhic planes, that is, the individuality surviving from incarnation to incarnation and underlying all our personalities. All human life is built upon these three bases.

Science, in studying physical nature, deals with the world of the *sthulopadhi* or the world around us in its gross form. Philosophy, in studying intellectual matters, deals with the plane of the *sukshmopadhi*—the subtle world of thinking and feeling, of the mind and emotions. Religion, in studying spiritual affairs, deals with the level of the *karanopadhi*—the causal world of those ultimate

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truths that bind man back to his origins. So science, philosophy, and religion seek order in all the bases of human life. And having discovered order through those disciplines, we can cooperate with the periodicity of the universe, consciously assisting and advancing the cosmic plan. Once again, theory and practice merge together: to cooperate with universal order, we must know it; but to discover that order, we must live it. The second proposition and the second object together imply study as an aspect of theosophical life.

### **Analogy and the Unexplained**

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The first fundamental proposition is concerned with the absolute unity that underlies the phenomenal world. The second proposition is concerned with this world and the cyclical order in it. The third proposition is concerned with the relationship between the absolute unity and the manifested world. Particularly, it is concerned with the human being as an expression of that relationship. The third proposition is the “fundamental identity of all Souls with the Universal Over-Soul, the latter being itself an aspect of the Unknown Root; and the obligatory pilgrimage for every Soul . . . through the Cycle of Incarnation (or ‘Necessity’) in accordance with Cyclic and Karmic Law.”

The third proposition asserts the identity of every individual with a single Over-Soul. That Over-Soul, which we call the Logos, is a consciousness that gives life to the

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matter of the universe. Ultimately the third proposition affirms our identity with the One Absolute Reality. It says, in effect, that the human being is a microcosm (or little world) corresponding to the macrocosm (or great world) in which we live. It shows the purpose of existence to be a pilgrimage back to our source.

This is an important proposition because it means that, if we are of the same nature as the universe itself, we can look at it and draw conclusions about ourselves and, conversely, look within ourselves to discover something about the universe. If shipbuilders want to design a completely new kind of ship, or space engineers a new sort of spacecraft, they do more than just draw up the plans on paper and then construct a ship the size of the *Queen Elizabeth* or a space-vehicle to take astronauts to the moon. First they use a model or a computer simulation to make sure that the design will actually work as they think it should. The model is thus a microcosm that can be tested and from which engineers can find out about the appropriateness of the design for the proposed vessel. That is, they use the law of analogy, and so can we. By analogies or correspondences, we can penetrate the unknown and develop faculties that are now only latent.

The third proposition also says that individual souls, because they are identical with the overshadowing Logos and are ultimately expressions of the one Reality, are like

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the Logos in being subject to the law of periodicity. We function according to the same laws and principles that guide the great universe around us.

When Oedipus was travelling to Thebes, he came upon the Sphinx, a creature that was half human and half lion and had the habit of asking riddles. It was also her unpleasant custom to devour travellers on the spot if they could not answer her riddle. So the Sphinx questioned Oedipus: "What is it that goes upon four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?" Without a moment's hesitation Oedipus answered the riddle correctly: "A human being, for we crawl on all fours in the morning of life, walk upright on two legs at the noon of life, and hobble on two legs and a cane in the evening of life." The Sphinx was so agitated because Oedipus had got the better of her that she threw herself off a high cliff and perished. In later years (according to André Gide, who interpreted the myth for modern times), Oedipus told his two sons how he had guessed the answer to the Sphinx's riddle when so many others had failed: "You must understand, my boys, that, at the beginning of our journey, each one of us encounters a monster that confronts us with the riddle that may prevent us from going farther. And although to each one of us the Sphinx may put a different question, you must persuade yourselves that the answer is always the same." There is only one answer to all the different questions life confronts us with: the human being. We

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humans are the answer to all riddles because humanity is the microcosm containing within itself all the questions life can ask and all the answers we can give. Or, as Blavatsky says in *Isis Unveiled* (2:635), “The trinity of nature is the lock of magic, the trinity of man the key that fits it.” We look into the mirror of human nature and see, reflected back, the cosmos.

Finally, the third proposition says that the world process is not random but purposeful. The journey on which we find ourselves has a goal: it is a pilgrimage—a journey to a spiritual destination for the sake of our soul’s health. According to some recent psychotherapists, such as Viktor Frankl, the greatest problem many people face today is that they lack a sense of purpose. The third proposition assures us that our lives have meaning and purpose and direction—that we are moving deliberately towards a goal: the rediscovery of what we really are. Because of the principle of analogy, we contain within ourselves the roadmap we are to follow. And if we follow it, as T. S. Eliot says in “Little Gidding”:

*. . . the end of all our exploring  
will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.*

What is the practical consequence of the third proposition? If we can learn something about the purpose of our existence by correlating ourselves with the universe, we should do so. Therefore, the third object

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of the Theosophical Society is “to investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in the human being”. This object fittingly includes both nature and humanity, for to study either is to learn something about the other.

Some people think of this third object as referring to extrasensory perception and paranormal phenomena of various kinds. And in the early days of the Theosophical Society such phenomena did play a large role. H. P. Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott met at a Spiritualist seance while A. P. Sinnett, one of the most prominent of the early English members of the Society in India, was attracted chiefly by Blavatsky’s remarkable powers. He wanted to promote the Society through such marvels; however, as K.H. wrote to him, “the T.S. is first of all a universal Brotherhood, not a Society for phenomena and occultism” (*Mahatma Letters*, chronological no. 135). The primacy of brotherhood over occult practices within the Society had been clarified as early as 1881 according to Colonel Olcott’s *Old Diary Leaves* (2:294), and was reaffirmed in Radha Burnier’s inaugural address a century later:

the work of the Society . . . is not concerned with phenomena and occult arts, interesting though many phenomena pertaining to the invisible world may be to the parapsychologist or even to the layman. They are trivial in the perspective of the knowledge needed to

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regenerate human life. It is not spiritualism, but spirituality which the world needs, not occult arts, but occultism, otherwise called gupta-vidya (the secret doctrine) and atma-vidya, true Wisdom.

The most important unexplained laws of nature are those by which we and all other beings are related to one another and the most important powers latent in us are those by which we are enabled to realise our fundamental identity with the Universal Over-Soul. To carry out the third object, one need not “sit for development” as the Spiritualists say; one need not become a follower of Dr. Rhine in his ESP experiments; one need not, like one of the astronauts, practice thought transference from outer space. The principal technique for investigating the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man—for realising our fundamental identity with the Universal Over-Soul—is the technique of meditation.

The most effective way of investigating the unexplained laws outside us and the potential latent within us is to practice control of the mind. Our minds are committed to a dualism of subject and object: we, as subject, think about objects. The thinker and the object thought about are the two elements that are essential for the mind to work. But behind this dualistic mind there is a nondual consciousness that is aware, but without an external object or a sense of “I.” When the dualistic mind is made

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quiet, the nondualistic consciousness can come through. To still the mind, we need to centre our little selves on the great Self that is around and within us. This centering of the self and quieting of the mind is meditation. From it comes a profound sense of freedom and of joy. Though in meditating we say that we restrain the mind, there is no sense of strain. To meditate is, in 1960s slang, to be “laid-back”, but it is also to be vital, aware, and participating. Meditation is both work and relaxation, withdrawal and participation, restraint and freedom. The meditative state is full of the contradictions that one must expect when venturing into the unexplained and the latent. The greatest frontier is the space within us. That is the landscape on which the “magic casements” of Theosophical theory open; that is the territory through which Theosophical practice calls us to journey on our pilgrimage. The third proposition and the third object together imply meditation as an aspect of the theosophical life.

## **The Essentials and the Seal**

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Theosophy, then, is both theoretical and practical. The essentials of its theory are the three fundamental propositions of *The Secret Doctrine*. The essentials of its practice are the three objects of the Society which lead us to the threefold life of service, study, and meditation. The theory and the practice are interrelated—each of the propositions implies one of the objects.

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In the Society's seal, the light, upward pointing triangle can represent theory. The top point stands for the first proposition: there is one absolute reality. The lower right-hand point stands for the second proposition: there is order in the universe, revealed in cycles. The lower left-hand point stands for the third proposition: every individual soul is identical with the Over-Soul; humanity, whose purpose is the pilgrimage, is a microcosm of the universe.

These three propositions deal with, respectively, God or ultimate Reality, the universe, and humanity. In Japanese flower arrangements, there are three elements—an upright representing heaven, a horizontal representing earth, and an oblique element between the other two representing human beings. The principle in the seal's triangle is the same. The three elements represented in the flower arrangement or by the three points of the triangle—God, the universe, and human beings—constitute everything that exists. And thus we have outdone that physicist who talked about “the universe and other matters”; the “other matters” are humanity and divinity, and we have dealt with all three.

If the light triangle represents theory, the dark triangle in the seal represents practice. Its bottom point stands for the first object: to form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood. Its upper left-hand point stands for encouraging the study of religion, philosophy, and

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science. Its upper right-hand point stands for the investigation of the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in human beings.

Religion, philosophy, and science represent the accumulated wisdom of the *past*, our intellectual inheritance from the scholars, sages, and saints who have gone before us. The unexplained laws and the latent powers are what the *future* holds. They are to be explained and to be developed hereafter, and will become our bequest to the generations that follow us. Brotherhood is a fact; it exists here and now. Theosophists do not claim to form brotherhood—that would be presumptuous and foolish. They aim only at forming a nucleus of the brotherhood that is already in the *present*. Thus the three objects cover humanity's past, which we study; its future, which we form in meditation; and its present, which we serve.

Finally, the triangles are interlaced, showing that theory and practice are interdependent. Each point is reflected in the one opposite. Thus Absolute Unity is reflected in brotherhood. And from that reflection we can draw an important conclusion: we are not alone. Each of us is part of a great network connecting us with all other humans and with all living beings. We are joined indissolubly in that state of “turned toward one” that is the universe.

The cyclical order of the universe is reflected in science, philosophy, and religion—a reflection that reminds us of

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the continuous existence of a Wisdom Tradition originating from the guardians of the race, preserved and transmitted by an immensely long chain of students, and finally descending to us: The Tradition interprets all things analogically and thus gives insight into the unknown. In volume 1 of *The Theosophist* (October 1879, pp. 2–3), Blavatsky noted that the ancient theosophists were called “ ‘analogists,’ on account of their method of interpreting all sacred legends, symbolical myths and mysteries, by a rule of analogy or correspondence, so that events which had occurred in the external world were regarded as expressing operations and experiences of the human soul.”

Thus the analogy between the universe and humanity and the task of discovering the purpose of both are reflected in an investigation of unexplained natural laws and latent human powers. From this reflection, we realise that the world about us is charged with meaning. The book of Nature waits to be read and is like a great hologram.

Holograms are photographic plates produced by coherent light (for example, a laser beam), and they have some remarkable properties, such as the production of a three-dimensional image when the same kind of coherent light is projected through them. But one of the most striking of their properties is that each part of the hologram contains all the information present in the

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whole. If you break a hologram into two halves, each half will project the full, original picture. And if you break it into quarters or eighths or sixteenths, each part, however small, will still project the whole picture. The whole is present in every part. Every bit is charged with meaning.

The Wisdom Tradition is like that. If, tomorrow, through some great catastrophe, all the Tradition should be lost and forgotten except for a single idea—such as karma—it would be possible to reconstruct the whole of the Tradition from that one part. It is a useful exercise to take one such idea and follow its implications to see how the rest of the Tradition grows out of it. But even if the entire Tradition were lost, with not a single idea remaining, human beings could still look within themselves, into and beyond their own minds, and reconstruct the Tradition in all its essentials. In a way, that is exactly what happens with generation after generation of students. For the external Tradition is not the real Tradition; it is only the outward show. The real Tradition is the inner reality that we each discover through meditation by ourselves and for ourselves, but that unites us with all other beings, as well as with the past and the future.

Thus in the points of the interlaced triangles, we see three great truths: we are not alone; the Wisdom Tradition is continuous; all things are charged with meaning. The interlaced triangles form a star—or is it a

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lotus bearing in its centre a jewel? The whole star-lotus is Theosophy—a theory about God, the human being, and the universe, as well as a practice involving service, study, and meditation. These are the essentials of Theosophy.



Dr John Algeo was Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Georgia, USA. He was a former International Vice-President of the Theosophical Society, and also a former National President of the TS in America.

He has many academic distinctions to his credit. He is the author of the book *Reincarnation Explored* and of many articles published in a number of journals around the world.

We are very grateful to Dr Algeo for giving us permission to reprint the article and for slightly revising it for publication.

